

On Playing Speed

Make it musical FIRST.

An article by:

Dr Christopher Smith -- TTU School of Music
christopher.smith@ttu.edu
webpages.acs.ttu.edu/chrissemi
www.geocities.com/coyotebanjo

What does it mean to play "too fast"? "Too slow"? Why do things sound "too fast" or "too slow"? These evaluations may have to do with perception and musicality than actual beats per minute.

The following was precipitated by a discussion on the Cittern-L list regarding various musicians who play tunes "too fast" or "too slow" or somewhere in between.

First a preface: I'd whole-heartedly agree that it's more important and valuable to be able to make a piece of music beautiful and energizing at a slow tempo, than to be able to play it in an ugly or mechanical fashion at Warp-9.

However, I don't think it's so easy to just say "slow and lyrical is more beautiful than fast and wild." Perceptions of tempo can be very subjective; something that seems a reasonable tempo while listening can seem hair-raisingly fast when you try to play it. Conversely, something that sounds rushed may not in fact be so very fast, but rather suffering from unmusical playing.

Case in point: at one point I learned my way through the reels sets on about 6 different Altan discs (had never got around to their recordings, and wanted to learn the Donegal tunes that everybody in the sessions learned from the same sources). I've noticed a 3-stage hearing-perception process in doing this.

(1) First listening to Mairead, Paul, Frankie, Dermot, and Ciaran playing the tunes, they seem fast, exciting, and beautiful, but

(2) When you sit down to first try to learn them from the recordings, they seem blindingly fast--and thus difficult to learn by ear, yet

(3) Once you've got them learned, and have woodshedded a fair amount, and go back to play along with the recording, they seem--once again--fast but not blinding.

Conversely, if you listen to Gearoid O hAllmhurain and Patrick Ourceau play (or Gearoid and Martin Hayes, or many other East Clare and East Galway players, for that matter), the reels seem moderate, lyrical, and beautiful. Sit down to learn them, and you realize that they play even more slowly than you realized--by comparison not only to Altan but even to "normal" session speeds. Learn the tunes and play along with them, and they seem--once again--moderate and beautiful.

The point here is that Altan doesn't sound "too fast," for example, and Gearoid/Ourceau don't sound "too slow," because in both cases, they are playing musically, with expression which does not erode at extreme ends of the spectrum of tempi. Of course, both are absolutely valid, absolutely contrasted ways of finding beauty in the music. The important insight is that, as players, our perceptions of tempi change according to what we're trying to get out of listening to those tempi. Even more importantly, perceptions of tempi are heavily influenced by the musicality or lack thereof with which a musician copes with that tempo.

Of course, these contrasts have to do with both regional musical dialects (Donegal versus Clare, for example), and also individual players' approaches, both those which are consistent across all of some individual's playing, and those which vary according to different situations.

It's a very good thing to know where in the tempo spectrum you can execute a given tune and still make it beautiful. Sure, one shouldn't play "too fast"--but one should realize that "too fast" for one player on a given tune need not be "too fast" for a different player on the same tune. If you try to play a tune faster than you can make it musical, it will sound "too fast." Conversely, if you are unaccustomed to playing a tune quite slowly, it's easy to fall into playing in a leaden, unphrased, and even dragging-the-tempo fashion. These issues are likewise affected by other parameters: for instance, when one is playing low in an instrument's register, the nearly unconscious temptation is to drag the tempo; when playing high, to rush the tempo (for most people).

I've also found that--generally speaking--there's a bit of a progression in one's own tempo tendencies when learning a particular tune. In most cases, I observe students going through 3 levels of executing tempo in a given tune.

(1) Generally, when first learning the tune, we stop-and-start, nail one phrase, screw up the next one, and so forth; at the next stage

(2), When we've pretty much got the notes learned but are struggling with execution, the tendency is actually to play too fast; to speed up, rush the tempo, and make the situation worse. Usually it's only at the final stage

(3) When we really know the tune in the ear AND under the fingers, that we can free up the concentration required to relax into the tempo and hold the groove.

That in turn suggests to me that rushing or dragging tempi is often not so much a function of technical facility or lack thereof, but rather a problem with attention, concentration, and relaxation. If you're trying to jump in on a tune that someone else is playing, it can be a bit like

trying to jump onto a moving train, and can feel similarly rushed and out-of-kilter. Once you're into the tune yourself (provided your chops are equal to it), it can feel as if the tempo has suddenly slowed down and become much more feasible. again, an issue of perception and relaxation.

I've learned a lot about this stuff from playing polyrhythmic African percussion music, where you may have three or more parts, all of different duration, all of different rhythmic profile, all starting and ending at different points. Often you have to make these parts interlock, balancing your own part (and if necessary nudging your own tempo slightly faster or slower) with the demands of the other parts. I have a S African friend who uses the analogy of a pup tent's guy wires: both lines from the tent's peak down to the ground have to exert equivalent pull; if one or the other suddenly tugs or relaxes, then the structure is likely to fall over.

By the way, the style that Martin Hayes uses to play with Dennis Cahill which is often held up as an ideal example of why slow is "better" than fast, and for which I heard the inaugural concert in Bloomington in '95 is at one end of a stylistic extreme, the "listening and getting in the zone" end, if you will. In contrast, on the recordings Hayes has done with his daddy and uncle with the Tulla Ceili Band, for example, he plays right up-to-tempo in a fashion very well suited to dancing the sets. The same player playing quite differently in different situations according to those situations' different demands and goals.